

KHORA: A SEMIOTIC PERSPECTIVE ON THE IMAGINATION OF THE FUTURE¹

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*The future is a hypothesis [...]
The future is a woman who
probably hopes²*

ABSTRACT: The term Khora indicates a concept proposed by Plato and still fascinating contemporary culture. It can be defined as a place and time of endless potentiality, as the receptacle of everything, and is often expressed through the figure of the *mother*. This figure, already proposed by Plato, can also be found in Christian iconography, which links the term Khora to the iconography of the “Madonna of the Sign”, a pregnant and praying Virgin. This maternal figure expresses very effectively the peculiar temporality that is linked to the concept of Khora: an *anterior* dimension, a place of the origin, but at the same time an *imminent* future, a moment of infinite openness to the possible that is going to take shape and to be realized soon. This essay proposes a short overview of the re-elaborations of the idea of Khora in contemporary semiotics, then focuses on the iconography of the pregnant mother. The conclusion presents a reflection on the relationship between the renewed success of the notion of Khora and the contemporary imaginary about time. This imaginary does not place the future in a linear perspective, but postulates a dynamic relationship between anteriority and imminence, which in a certain way coexist and cannot be distinguished as distinct units in a linear syntagmatic chain, as the idea of Khora actually suggests.

KEYWORDS: imminence, motherhood, potentiality, matter, semiosis

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² Enrico Ruggeri, “Il futuro è un’ipotesi” (song, 1985), my transl.

1. Introduction

The concept of Khora, proposed by Plato in the *Timaeus*, is elusive and mysterious, but precisely for this reason it has exercised great fascination and generated interpretations that cross different cultural contexts and theoretical perspectives.³ Moreover, it can be compared to other categories and ideas based on different philosophical, religious or cultural assumptions, which are similar under several respects, such as, just to mention one example, the Dao of Chinese philosophy. In particular, this notion is interesting from a semiotic point of view because it concerns the fundamental node of the creation of meaning, the core of semiosis, the extreme boundary of interpretation. In fact, the Khora can be related to some fundamental concepts, such as the Peircian *firstness* or the Hjelmslevian *matter* or *purport*.

Although a systematic and extensive comparison would be of great interest both for a general semiotics and for a semiotics of cultures, this essay has a much more limited objective. It starts from a brief summary of how contemporary semiotics takes up and reinterprets the Platonic Khora⁴, not simply commenting on Plato's text, but elaborating it in an original and innovative way. This summary has no pretension of being exhaustive, but highlights in particular the *temporal* dimension of this concept. This attention to temporality allows then to link the idea of Khora to studies on that phase of the interpretative process in which a hypothesis of meaning is formulated, a moment in which the interpreter opens up to all possible senses, before choosing (or not) one in particular. This moment can in some ways be compared to the sudden aesthetic grip described by Greimas (1987), but also to the "budding of meaning", which makes the object of the "parasemiotics" proposed by Leone (2020, p. 12).

The Khora can therefore be thought of as a moment of power, of endless potentiality, and therefore in a certain sense it is also the place of the imagination of the imminent future. The dimension at the same time spatial and temporal of the Khora as a receptacle of everything,

³ For a short summary of the interpretations of the concept of Khora in ancient philosophy and in Derrida, see Deregibus (2018), for an overview of the interpretations in contemporary philosophy and culture, see Ciucci (2019).

⁴ Leaving aside all the theories that resemble it in various respects but do not mention the Khora as such.

and therefore also of the future, is captured very well in a figure already used by Plato, that of the *mother*. This figure was then taken up and reworked by Christian iconography, which links the term Khora to the iconography of the “Madonna of the Sign”, a pregnant and praying Virgin who welcomes in her womb the God who becomes incarnate: the last part of the essay focuses precisely on this figure of pregnancy, of containing something that cannot be contained. Indeed, this maternal figure expresses very effectively the peculiar temporality that is linked to the concept of Khora: an *anterior* dimension, a place of the origin, but at the same time an *imminent* future, a moment of infinite openness to the possible that is going to be realized soon.

This temporality can hardly be defined as simply linear. In conclusion, it will be argued that the widespread interest in the idea of Khora in contemporary culture can be explained, at least in part, precisely because of this particular and non-linear temporality: the fascination for this semio-philosophic concept can indeed be interpreted as a sign of a change occurring in the contemporary imaginary about time. This renewed imagination of the future no longer takes place in the form — or rather tense — of a “simple future”, placed in a straight line, but it rather responds to this dynamic relationship between anteriority and imminence, which in a certain way coexist and cannot be distinguished as distinct units in a linear syntagmatic chain, as the idea of Khora actually suggests.

2. The Khora, from Philosophy to Semiotics

2.1. *Plato*

In the cosmological discourse of the *Timaeus*, the Khora is described as formless and indeterminate matter, eternal and invisible. Unknowable, it escapes any coherent and unambiguous definition. It can only be known intuitively, in ways that refer “in some respects to divination and dream activity” (Fronterotta 2018, p. 55, my transl.). The postulation and description of the Khora are not presented as a truth, a sacred history or a divine revelation, but instead as a plausible hypothesis and nothing more (Bonfantini 2010, p. 275). The Khora, which is neither sensible nor intelligible, but in a certain sense both, can only be grasped

with a “spurious” reasoning. For this reason, it can be described only by resorting to figures: it is thus defined as a space or place, which provides “the ‘seat’ to all the realities that are born and perish, precisely for the reason that what is born and perishes, is born in some place, in which and from which, then, perishes” (Reale 2018, p. 571, my transl.). Other figures to describe the Khora are those of “receptacle”, “nurse” (49a) and “mother” (51a).⁵ The Khora constitutes the “third kind” as part of a trinitarian system: “And we may liken the recipient to a mother, the model to a father, and that which is between them to a child; and we must remember that if a moulded copy is to present to view all varieties of form, the matter in which it is moulded cannot be rightly prepared unless it be entirely bereft of all those forms which it is about to receive from without”. (50d)

These preliminary considerations of course do not give a complete account of the whole theorization of the Khora by Plato, but highlight two important features, which will also guide our reading of the semi-otic reinterpretations of this idea. In the first place, the imagery of the Khora is certainly linked to the spatial dimension, as much literature underlines, but also to the temporal one. Consistent with the ambiguous nature of this concept, this temporality refers to an original “before” and at the same time to a “then” that can only be intuited, hypothesized (dreaming, divining?). Secondly, the Khora is imagined by resorting to the figure of motherhood.

2.2 Derrida

For Derrida, the Khora is the announcement of the irruption of the other, it indicates the *imminence*:

Chora comes to us, as the name. When a name comes, it immediately says more than the name, the other of the name and the other as such, of which it announces precisely the irruption. This announcement does not yet promise, and moreover does not threaten. [...] It still remains a stranger to the person, naming only the imminence and still a foreign imminence to the myth, time and history of all possible promises and threats. (Derrida 1977, p. 45)

⁵ For the English version of the *Timaeus*, I refer to the edition by Archer-Hind (1888).

Derrida therefore correlates the Khora to the concept of *annunciation*: “[The Khora] is not, and this non-being can only *announce itself*, that is to say, not allowing itself to be taken or conceived...” (Derrida 1977, p. 53). Just as the Khora is a receptacle, in the same way to grasp the Khora means not to understand it, but “to receive it or conceive it” (Derrida 1977, p. 53). Both the concept of imminence and that of annunciation refer to the temporal dimension of the Khora and relate it to the future, more precisely to an announced and imminent future.

Derrida also delves into the Platonic association of the Khora with the motherly figure. He warns against thinking that femininity is an attribute of Khora, which in fact has no attributes, much less anthropomorphic ones, but at the same time believes that Plato’s comparison with the mother is not a purely rhetorical move (Derrida 1977, p. 54–55). If on the one hand it is not a simple metaphor, on the other it is not even true that “the Khora is properly a mother, a nurse, a receptacle, an imprint bearer ...” (Derrida 1977, p. 49–50), because it leads “beyond the metaphorical sense/proper sense polarity”. Philosophical language — as well as mythological language, since Khora also stands beyond the distinction between mythos and logos — is not adequate to speak of Khora. Its description therefore requires figures, such as those of mother and nurse, which are “necessarily inadequate” and at the same time “are not exactly true figures. Of what they approach philosophy cannot speak directly, on the way of vigilance or truth (true or plausible). The dream is between the two, neither one nor the other. Philosophy cannot speak philosophically of what resembles only its ‘mother’, its ‘nurse’, its ‘receptacle’ or its ‘imprint bearer’.” (Derrida 1977, p. 85).

Commenting on the passage in *Timaeus* (50d, see above) in which the Khora is described as a mother, Derrida (1977, pp. 82–83) observes that the Khora

...does not belong to an oppositional pair [...]. The mother would be apart. And since she is but a figure, a pattern, therefore one of these determinations that receives *Khora*, this is *no* more of a mother than she is a nurse, any more than she is a woman. This *triton ghenos* is not a *ghenos*, first of all because it is a unique individual. [...] In the couple outside the couple, this strange mother, who gives rise without generating, we can no longer consider her as an origin. [...] Pre-original, *prior* and external to each generation, it no longer has even the sense of a

past, of a present past. Front does not mean any prior time. The relationship of independence, the non-relationship is more like that of the interval or the spacing of what is arranged in it to be received.

The figure of motherhood is therefore deeply correlated with the peculiar “anterior” dimension that characterizes the Khora as a receptacle of everything.

2.3 *Kristeva*

The connection with the idea of motherhood is central in Kristeva’s reinterpretation of the concept. Kristeva intermingles semiotics and psychoanalysis, as shown by her definition of Khora as “a nonexpressive totality formed by the drives and their stases in a motility that is as full of movement as it is regulated” (Kristeva 1984, p. 25). Khora is characterized by indeterminacy and incertitude, it lends itself to intuition and “precedes evidence, verisimilitude, spatiality, and temporality.” (Kristeva 1984, p. 26). It is an *anterior* dimension. it precedes the sign, as it precedes the speech, which leans on it but at the same time cancels it by fixing it.

Kristeva develops the Platonic figures of the receptacle, mother and nurse correlating them to Freudian and Kleinian theories to affirm that the Khora is organized on the basis of the drives, which “involve pre-Oedipal semiotic functions and energy discharges that connect and orient the body to the mother” (Kristeva 1984, p. 27). According to Kristeva, “The mother’s body is therefore what mediates the symbolic law organizing social relations and becomes the ordering principle of the semiotic *chora*.” (Kristeva 1984, p. 27). Also, in her essay on the abject, Kristeva (1980) identifies the Khora with a movement that precedes the correlation of “not yet me” with an “object”, constituting both. Such movement is at the same time centripetal, as it places the ego at the center of a whole system, and centrifugal, in that it hooks onto the Other, thus producing meaning.

The dimension of the Khora is for Kristeva connected to the “semiotic”, as opposed to the “symbolic”. The former is organized according to processes of displacement and condensation, but also on the basis of relationships between the body, not yet unified but “fragmented” into parts or areas, and external objects and subjects, but not yet formed as such, precisely because of the indeterminateness that

characterizes this dimension. The semiotic Khora is the place where the subject is constituted, in a continuous movement between drives and stasis: from this point of view, Kristeva (1984, p. 29) adopts “a genetic perspective”, placing “All these various processes and relations, anterior to sign and syntax [...] diachronically within the process of the constitution of the subject precisely because *they function synchronically within the signifying process of the subject himself* [...]. Only in *dream* logic, however, have they attracted attention, and only in certain signifying practices, such as the text, do they dominate the signifying process.” (Kristeva 1984, p. 29). While the semiotic has deep roots and perhaps, Kristeva speculates, even some “hereditary” bases, given for example by the transmission of some genes through the biological code or physiological memory, the symbolic indicates instead syntax, categoriality, and we could say the *langue* as a social convention.

An idea that might seem similar to the semiotic Khora is the Hjelmslevian notion of purport. In fact, Hjelmslev (1943) defines purport (or “matter”, in the current Italian translation) as sense or thought, as an amorphous and provisional mass, in itself unknowable and unanalyzable, which is put into form by language, thus becoming substance. Kristeva (1979) compares her idea of Khora with the Hjelmslevian idea of matter, but notes the difference between the two. In fact, Kristeva interprets the Hjelmslevian theory as phenomenological, in that it accepts the concept of the sign as a sign of something else, that is, of an object that *exists*. Such a theory limits itself to the level of what Kristeva defines as symbolic, without being able to grasp the underground or anterior functioning of the pre-sign dimension that coincides with the semiotic Khora.

Kristeva also mentions the Khora in *Le temps des femmes*, thus determining the diffusion of the reflection on the Khora into feminist discourse: from this perspective, the Khora is identified with a primitive feminine dimension, unclassifiable and prior to the dualism of genders, which it overcomes (Ciucci 2019, pp. 147–148). As we shall see, the association between femininity-motherhood and Khora is not a prerogative of the 20th-century rediscovery of the platonic concept, but was also developed by Eastern Christian culture, in relation to the mystery of the Incarnation and the figure of the Mother of God.

3. Semiotics and the Time of the Khora, between Anteriority and Imminence

The semio-philosophical reflection taking its cue from Plato and articulated especially by Derrida and Kristeva places the Khora in a non-space and a non-time that can only be grasped intuitively, as in a dream or in divination: as we have seen, the Khora is linked to a dimension that is at the same time anterior and imminent. Indeed, the semiotic Khora is the pre-sign dimension that can only be described in the sign dimension, and in this sense it is linked to the concept of “anteriority”. At the same time, it can also be defined as the moment in which the sense *is about* to manifest and take shape, and therefore as “imminence” of meaning. From this perspective, the Khora is the time of the hypothesis, of the imagination of a future that is already there in power but still cannot be grasped, just before its actual realization.

In this sense, the concept of Khora can be connected to those semiotic theories that do not use this term and its imagery, but that express a concept in some respects similar. These theories are the ones that explore the extreme boundaries of meaning. This kind of inquiry generally entails the adoption of a figurative style, which is in contrast with the traditional scientific discourse, based instead on logic and reasoning on recurring structures. An example is given by Greimas’ last book, *De l'imperfection*, which is notoriously an anomalous text compared to the rest of this author’s production. Among the singularities of this book are an initial and a final text which do not bear a title, but are detached from the rest of the chapters and reported in italics. The lexicon used in these texts is similar to what the authors we have considered so far employ to talk about the Khora. In particular, the final text reads:

To want to say the unspeakable, to paint the invisible: proofs that the thing, unique, has happened, that other things are perhaps possible. Nostalgia and expectations nourish the imagination, whose forms, withered and luxuriant, take the place of life [...]. Imperfection appears as a springboard that projects us from insignificance to meaning. What’s left? Innocence: dream of a return to the origins when man and the world are one in an original bench. Or the attentive hope of a unique aesthesis, of a dazzle that does not force us to close our eyelids. (Greimas 1987, p. 99, my transl.)

In Greimas, the intuition of this original whole is identified with the sudden and ephemeral aesthetic grip, but what matters for the present purpose is to observe that in Greimas' discourse we can find traces of the imaginary in which the anteriority and the imminence of the sense are mixed, with the aesthesis that functions as a springboard that projects us *towards* the sense. Anteriority and imminence appear non-linear, but placed in a circular vision, given by the hope of returning to the origin, of filling the lack, given by the detachment from the situation of the initial fullness of meaning.

A second example is given by the interpretation of the *Scenà* proposed by Leone (2020, p. 11, my transl.):

The *scenà* is therefore, from a certain point of view, the linguistic-phonetic definition of nothingness. It is the attempt to encode in language what is not and has no sound. It is the transcription of an absence. On the one hand, it is therefore an exercise in measuring what remains in the shadows, unexpressed, suffocated, silent. On the other, with a metaphysics of positivity, it is a sign of the sense sprouting from nothing, symbol of the first shadow of sound in the void, shy cry.

In this case again we find a temporality that correlates an absence (a concept that implies the imagination of an anterior presence) and the projection of an imminent meaning, which “sprouts”. According to Leone, the study of this dimension, that is, of the “enchanted breakers in which meaning springs primitively, from the shadow of nothingness” cannot be the object of a true and proper semiotics, but of “a parasemiotics that cannot capture the meaning in its meshes but, stammering, indicates its first flash.” (Leone 2020, p. 12).

4. Khora and pregnancy: The Madonna of the Sign (Blachernitissa)

The concept of Khora, therefore, can only be expressed by means of figures, and these figures often refer to the semiotic dimension — the Khora as the source of meaning — or to the space-time dimension — the Khora as a place and time anterior and imminent together, and as a consequence not knowable but only guessed or foreseen as in dream

or revelation. We have seen how these characteristics are often linked, in turn, to the semantic field of motherhood, which is evoked by Plato and further elaborated by Derrida and Kristeva. Even more specifically this idea of the imminent future is well expressed by the figure of pregnancy. For this reason it is interesting, in this last part of the discussion, to explore an iconographic theme that reworks precisely this figure, in the context of Christian culture, a culture deeply influenced by Platonism. Even though there is by no means direct connection between the thought of the thinkers considered here and this theme as it is developed in Christianity, there seems to be at least a common imagery, a cultural common root, which is detectable through the recourse to similar figures.

Among the icons that characterize the Christian culture, especially in its Eastern variants, there is the Blachernitissa,⁶ also known as the “Madonna of the Sign” (Spidlink and Rupnik 2017). It is a Virgin Mary with her hands turned upwards in prayer and, in the center of the bust, a clypeus representing the unborn Child radiant with light. The icon recalls Isaiah 7:14 (“Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, whom she shall call Immanuel”) and 1Ki 8:327 (“But is it really true that God dwells on earth? Behold, the heavens and the heavens of heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!”), but also the Akathist Hymn (Todorova 2022; Ousternhout 1995, p. 66).

In particular, there is an example of this icon in the parekklesion (i.e. chapel) of the church of St. Savior in Khora, Istanbul (14th century). In this case, Khora is also the toponym (indicating field, country, or place), and this adds a further layer to this already polysemic term.⁷ In the parekklesion, the icon of the Virgin with the unborn child is accompanied by the writing: “*he Chora tou Achoretou*”, the container of the uncontainable. The icon is part of a complex fresco program, in which “images of events occurring in the past, present, and future are invoked as if they were occurring simultaneously” (Ousterhout 1995,

⁶ The name derives from the place where tradition places the model of this iconography. On the value and meaning of icons in Eastern Christian culture, see the classic work by Florenskij (2000). For further semiotic analyses of representations of the Virgin, see e.g. Galofaro (2020; 2023).

⁷ The parekklesion is in a church which is part of a monastery (Ousternhout 1995, p. 66), which was musealized, and nowadays converted into a mosque, see: <https://muze.gen.tr/muze-detay/kariye>.

p. 63). This particular temporarily, common to byzantine churches, takes in this case a specific meaning in light of the fact that the chapel in question is a funeral chapel: the theme of the mystery of incarnation, which is one of the main meanings associated to the Blachernitissa (cf. Todorova 2022) is thus connected to the theme of salvation (Ousternhout 1995, p. 66). The image of the Virgin is paralleled, even in spatial terms, to that of the Christ, defined as “*he Chora ton Zonton*”, the place of the living, alluding to “the eternal reward for the faithful in heaven” (Ousternhout 1995, p. 68). According to Ousternhout (1995), the frescoes, the architectural structure, just like the funeral liturgy itself, create an intimate bond between incarnation and salvation, to the point that in certain cases it is difficult to draw a neat distinction between themes and figures that refer to the one or the other. In this case, the concept of Khora fully displays its spatio-temporal ambiguity: it represents the incarnation, under the figure of a pregnant woman and of an unborn child, that is, the *imminence* of birth, and at the same time, it represents the *hope* of salvation. Birth and death are connected in a non-linear vision, and in this case Khora constitutes the anteriority of life itself and its returning point. It is particularly significant that this figure is expressed through the image of the pregnant Virgin, defined as the dwelling place of the infinite.

According to Catholic theologians Spidlink and Rupnik (2017, p. 109), the Madonna of the Sign also has a further semiotic connotation. Indeed, it can be related to the iconography of the Saint Sophia, or Wisdom: “Sophia is understood as a unity between divine and created. And Our Lady is in fact the place of this meeting.” (Spidlik and Rupnik, p. 109, my transl.). In this vision too, the reminiscence of God is connected to the waiting for the second coming: the pregnant Virgin, therefore, *annunciates*, or stays for, *as a sign*, the savior who will come and the new world.

5. Conclusion: the Fascination of Khora and the Imaginary of the Future in a non-linear Temporality

In many sectors of contemporary culture, the Khora is the subject of reflection and interpretation: it is discussed in architecture (e.g. Deregibus 2018), in philosophy of law (e.g. Heritier 2021), in theology (e.g.

Zlomislík and Deroo 2010), in gender studies (e.g. Butler 1993), in geography and physics (cf. Ciucci 2019) and so on. It therefore proves to be a useful tool or category to deal with a changing world and, in this context, to imagine the culture of the imminent future. Perhaps it is not entirely accidental that the definition of Khora has traits somewhat similar to the definition of posterity such as “the waiting horizon for today’s action, the dimension in which a future is built in memory and for memory [...] the dimension in which the future and the past not only touch each other, but inter-define each other.” (Lorusso 2020, p. 313).

From a semiotic point of view, the reflection on the Khora can be placed — as I have tried to argue here — in the framework of a trend that has surfaced several times in recent decades, namely the attempt to study the margins of meaning and the pre-sign dimension, which is not only *anterior* to meaning, but also represents the *imminence*, that is, the future in potential, of the sense just intuited, open to the multiple, even to the infinite, which is just about to be realized. As we have seen, the study of these margins requires a metalanguage different from that of “standard” semiotics, to the point that Leone (2020) speaks of “par-semiotics”. The interest in this Khora of sense is correlated with a widespread interest in themes and phenomena such as the aesthetic grip or the mystical experience.⁸ In this kind of phenomenon, the imagination of the future is not part of a linear vision of time, but is inextricably linked to the past and the present, mixing anteriority and imminence.

The widespread interest in these issues can probably also be explained in the light of the new technologies that are profoundly revolutionizing our idea of time, compressing it into an all-encompassing synchrony. Just to mention one famous example, discussing the ephemeral nature of the digital memory, Floridi (2014, p. 18) observes that “ICTs are not preserving the past for future consumption because they make us live in a perennial present”. Much reflection about ICTs and new media suggests that the linear conception of time is deeply in crisis, and that we are moving towards a new conception in which the future as such can no longer be imagined. From this perspective, it

⁸ The reflection on mysticism, even if under different aspects and from different perspectives, unites many of the thinkers mentioned: for Derrida cf. Oosterling (2001), for Kristeva cf. Valentini (2014). See also Leone (2014).

seems reasonable to hypothesize that in the era in which the linear idea of time dominated, the concept of Khora survived at the margins, as a counternarrative or a minority vision compared to the hegemonic one; however, it is becoming an interesting concept as it is somehow similar to the new idea of time that is enjoying an increasing success. In this conception and the related imaginary, the idea of the future is inseparable from a dimension at the same time anterior and imminent. The recourse to the category of Khora can thus be explained precisely as the rediscovery of a notion perceived as particularly useful and appropriate to express a sensitivity proper to our culture and to gain an improved comprehension of the important changes it is facing. Moreover, the idea of pregnancy and of imminence entailed by this complex concept provide efficacious figures to intellectuals and thinkers to express the sense of both indeterminacy and infinite potentiality related to these cultural and technological novelties.

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